

## The Romsey Town Five

### Romsey Town and five parliamentary heroes of the Civil War

Cambridge has its fair share of uninspiring and conventional street and building names. But in a corner of Romsey there is an unexpected and unusual set of names. This article sheds light on what links these names and how they came about.

My journey begins one day in the pandemic, cycling south across Coldham's Common on the Chisholm Trail, waiting at the Coldham's Lane traffic lights, then carrying on southwards up past the Nuffield gym, heading towards Mill Road, and then actually for once paying attention to the names of the relatively new housing developments to my right:



Pym Court



Hampden Gardens





Winstanley Court

Wait a moment, that's a bit of a coincidence....what street am I on?



So, here we have: Cromwell Road, and next to it Fairfax Road; Winstanley Court, Hampden Court and Pym Court. Beyond Cromwell, these names are unlikely to be recognized as significant unless you are interested in the history or the political legacy of the English Civil War (1642-51) and the short-lived and little-understood Commonwealth (1649 -1660). All these named individuals were of major importance on the parliamentary side of the Civil War.

This is unusual. In general, and by comparison with, say, France, as a country we do not choose major historical characters for our street and building names – still less so when those characters were on the parliamentary side of this particular conflict and therefore may be burdened in the public imagination with a degree of ambivalence, if not hostility.

Let's get to know a bit more about the five individuals involved.

Oliver Cromwell needs little introduction. Cromwell was a student at Sidney Sussex and the MP for Cambridge. In 1642 he led, in Cambridge, one of the early actions on the eve of the civil war: with a band of supporters, he prevented the Colleges from sending their silver plate up to York to help pay for the king's army. Cromwell also made sure that none of the weapons in the city left either. Despite no real experience as a soldier, he turned out to be a military strategist of genius in the Civil War. He was the main instigator of the trial and execution of King Charles I and Lord Protector of the republic (i.e. head of state – the only non-royal head of state there has ever been). He was the leader of an utterly brutal conquest of Ireland and an invasion of Jamaica which laid the foundations of English slavery there.



Portrait of Oliver Cromwell by Samuel Cooper, 1656

He was and remains a contradictory figure. In this area of the country he initially defended the rights of commoners affected by the drainage of the Fens, but later headed one of the biggest drainage schemes and personally benefited from it. He led a revolution against the king that commanded widespread popular support but ended up being hated by the religious and political radicals who demanded an extension of democracy and greater civil rights. They felt he ended up betraying their more radical vision of society, but it was hardly a betrayal. He was a country gentleman MP who was passionate about religious reform but never really interested in extending democracy or redistributing wealth. In popular imagination he was a philistine killjoy, but in reality he financed the universities of Oxford, Glasgow and Dublin and his court was a patron of painting, music and science.

He has a statue outside the House of Commons, in recognition of his belief that government should be accountable to the people, but at the same time exhibited clearly dictatorial tendencies in his approach to government. He ensured that England would be ruled by Parliaments and not by kings – but never got on very well with his own parliaments. His commitment to religious toleration extended to welcoming back the Jews to England (centuries after their expulsion in 1290) but such toleration did not extend to Catholics or to the religious radicals on his own side. The most vivid instance of such alleged betrayal was Cromwell's imprisonment of the Levellers (we'll come back to them later) and execution of three of their leaders, at Burford, near Oxford, in 1649. They represented a challenge to the political and economic supremacy of landed gentry MPs such as Cromwell. Cromwell was socially conservative, and his response was brutal.

Cromwell divided opinion – at the time, and ever since. Some individuals took a long time to forgive or forget: no reigning monarch could bring themselves to set foot in Cromwell's Cambridge College, Sidney Sussex, until 1996.





Plaque in Sidney Sussex

College Credit Alamy

The city of Cambridge does now have a handsome plaque recognizing Cromwell, in Market Passage – but it is high up and inconspicuous, perhaps reflecting our society’s ambivalence about this extraordinary man.



<https://www.cambridgeppf.org/Pages/FAQs/Category/people-with-blue-plaques>

He of course is the exception to the rule about British reticence when it comes to naming roads after individuals. According to a BBC website, he has more roads named after him than any other English man or woman, other than Queen Victoria.

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil\\_war\\_revolution/cromwell\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/cromwell_01.shtml)  
One such is our own Cromwell Road.

General Sir Thomas Fairfax was Commander-in-Chief of the New Model Army, which at the relatively young age of 32 he fashioned out of three existing parliamentary armies. He was the most important general on the parliamentary side. During the political crisis of 1641-42, he was one of the moderates who were anxious for agreement between King and Parliament. But on the outbreak of war, he and his family supported the latter. He led the parliamentary forces in decisive battles at Winceby (1643), Nantwich and Marston Moor (1644), Naseby and Langport (1645). When the Civil War ended, Fairfax still hoped for a settlement with the king; he was out-of-step with the political and religious radicalism (in the army and in the country more generally) of those who supported Cromwell. He declined to take part in the trial and execution of Charles. He resigned his command in 1650 and retired to his estates in Yorkshire. He declined to join Cromwell in the invasions of Ireland or Scotland. He opposed military rule by Cromwell and in 1660 actively assisted General Monck in the restoration of Charles II.

Cromwell and Fairfax roads were built in the 1930s, on what had previously been open fields.

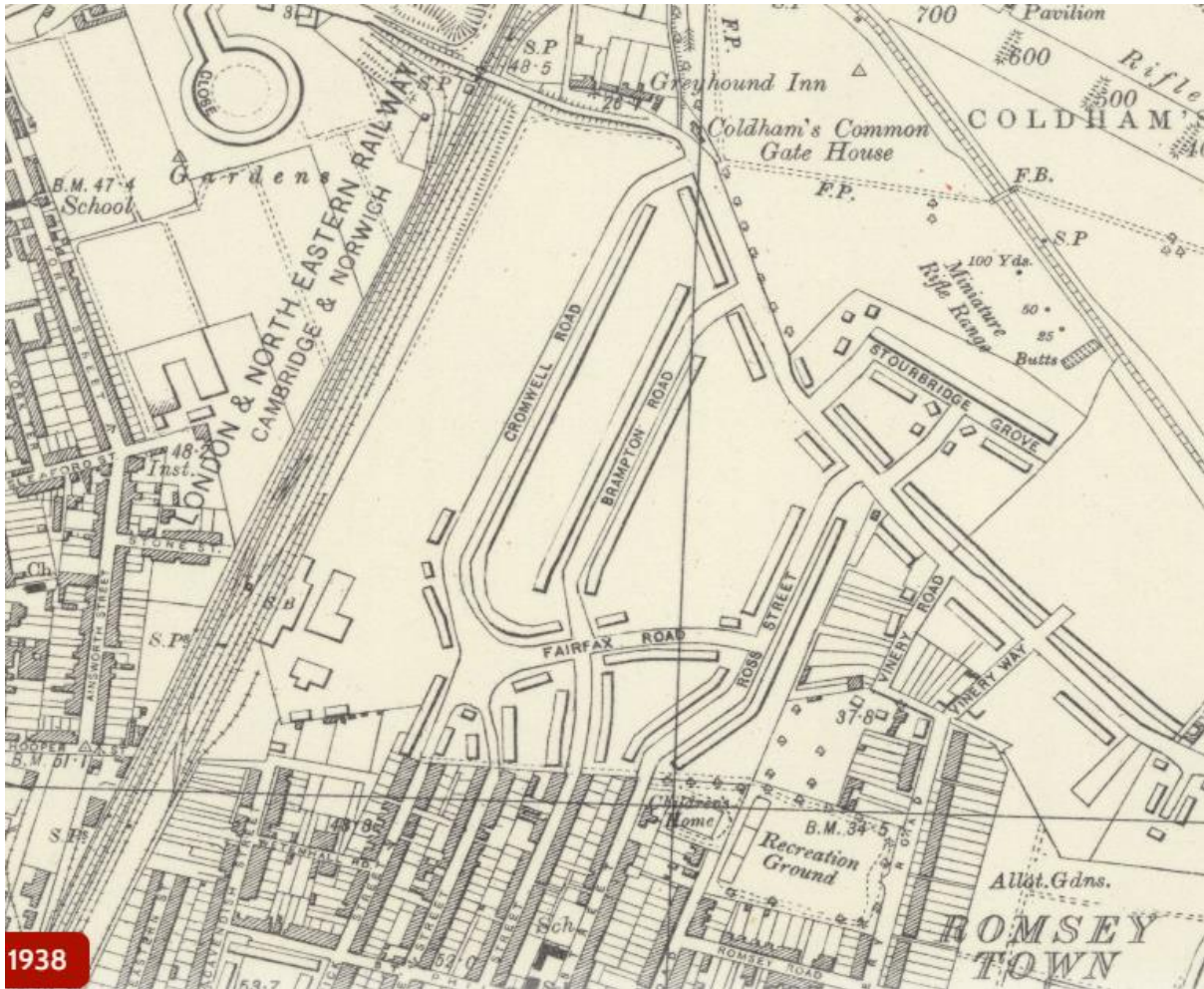
In this OS map of 1925, we can clearly see that the land to the east of the railway is allotment land.



<https://www.oldmapsonline.org/en/Cambridge?gid=2e726409-0895-411a-8d44-ebdcff3e84e6#position=15.4151/52.20324/0.14807&year=1925>

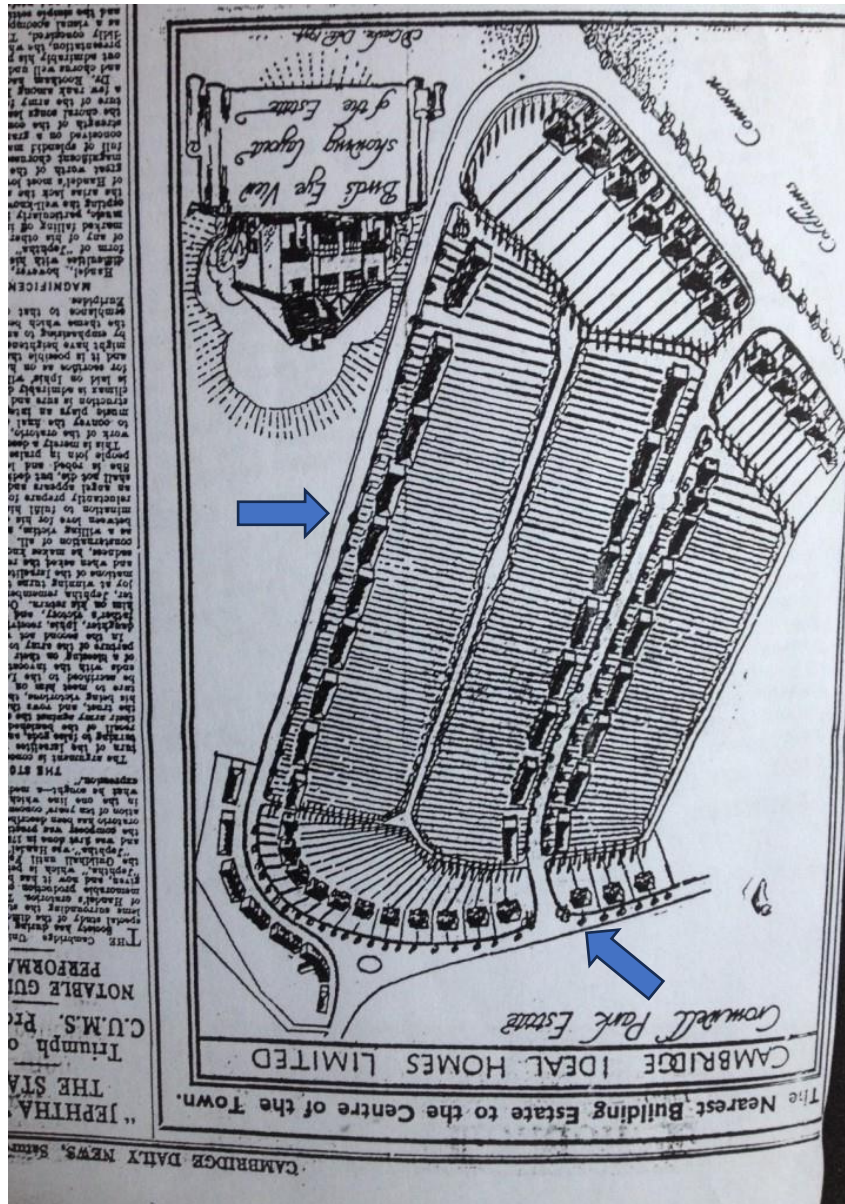
By the time of this OS map in 1938, Cromwell Road and Fairfax Road have been built:





<https://www.oldmapsonline.org/en/Cambridge?gid=cb3bc634-f9a8-489b-a868-60ed49a189fb#position=15.3975/52.20361/0.14831&year=1938>

We can get a little more precise with the date, thanks to an article in Capturing Cambridge, showing the building in 1934 of the Cromwell Park Estate, with houses to be built on Cromwell, Fairfax and Brampton Roads.



I have printed this article from the Cambridge Daily News (23 February 1934) upside down to show north at the top of the picture. The roads marked with blue arrows are Cromwell and Fairfax Roads.

<https://capturingcambridge.org/romsey/cromwell-road/cromwell-park-estate/>

How did they acquire their names? It seems likely that the names were felt at the time to be appropriate for an area of the city that had become well-known as Red Romsey. Here is the academic historian Jon Lawrence, looking back at his encounter with Romsey in the 1980s.

*I was also drawn to Mill Road by its history, and especially by the ways in which it seemed to convey a sense of civic identity and pride that existed independent of the university. This was nowhere more evident than in Romsey Town, where*

*trade unionism and Labour politics had put down their deepest roots between the wars [i.e. exactly the time of the building of the Cromwell Park Estate], helping to fuel the vivid stories of ‘Red Romsey’ that some of my neighbours could still recount fifty years later: stories about local working men giving their free time to help build the Labour Club on the corner of Coleridge Road or about the celebrities of Labour politics who had visited the ward. They were stories which resonated with pride about having carved out an identity for Romsey that owed little or nothing to the colleges and university that had dominated the wider city for hundreds of years. <https://capturingcambridge.org/mill-road-area/mill-road-life/why-mill-road-matters-to-an-historian/>*

Although no evidence is offered, this link to the character of Red Romsey is also the conclusion of Ronald Gray and Derek Stubbings in their book, “Cambridge Street Names: their origins and associations” (CUP 2000).

Also built in the 1930s at the same time, was neighbouring Brampton Road. At first sight, this does not seem to have any obvious Civil War associations. And it may, of course, simply have been named for completely unrelated reasons, after the village of Brampton, near Huntingdon. There is also a Brampton in Cumbria, where Oliver Cromwell imprisoned 40 royalist soldiers, but this would be a peculiar and unlikely link.

I can offer a more interesting possibility, although it’s still quite a stretch. Perhaps we should look to Herefordshire, where Brampton Bryan Castle was held for Parliament by the redoubtable Lady Brilliana Harley during the first of two sieges by Royalist forces. If there were any evidence to back up a link between Brampton Road and Brampton Bryan Castle, it would be very welcome – it would increase our five parliamentary names to six (and would helpfully improve the gender balance of this presentation).





Lady Brilliana Harley, credit

[https://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl\\_shl/brilliana\\_harley.htm](https://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/hsl_shl/brilliana_harley.htm)

Cambridge is not quite alone in recognizing both Cromwell and Fairfax. Hertford - uniquely, I think - also has roads named after both of them. But Hertford cannot compete with Romsey's five Civil War names.

Next we have two MPs: John Hampden and John Pym. They were two of the renowned "Five Members" – that is, the five puritan MPs whom Charles I tried to arrest in January 1642, a significant trigger for the fighting which broke out in the summer of that year. All five are commemorated at the State Opening of Parliament each year for their principled and courageous stand against arbitrary royal rule.

John Hampden was a cousin of Oliver Cromwell and the MP for constituencies in Cornwall and then Buckinghamshire. There are some memorial plaques commemorating him, but as far as I am aware, there are no roads or buildings named after him.

John Hampden was a Puritan, or more precisely Presbyterian, gentleman MP strongly motivated (as was Cromwell) by the desire to erode the influence of Catholicism and of the bishops in the Church of England, and by his defence of parliamentary sovereignty. In 1627 Hampden was imprisoned for nearly a year for refusing to contribute a forced loan demanded by the king. Ten years later

he was prosecuted for resisting the King's "Ship Money" tax – not because he disapproved of taxation, but because he thought such taxation required parliamentary approval. He remained a thorn in Charles's side and was one of the promoters of the Grand Remonstrance in the House of Commons, in 1642, setting out all the arbitrary powers and actions that the king could be charged with over the last decade. When the MPs attempted to publish this, the king tried to arrest them and shortly after fighting broke out, heralding the start of the civil war. Hampden raised and led a regiment in support of parliament. And, in heroic fashion, he died on the battlefield after being wounded in the shoulder, at the battle of Chalgrove Field in Oxfordshire on 24 June 1643.

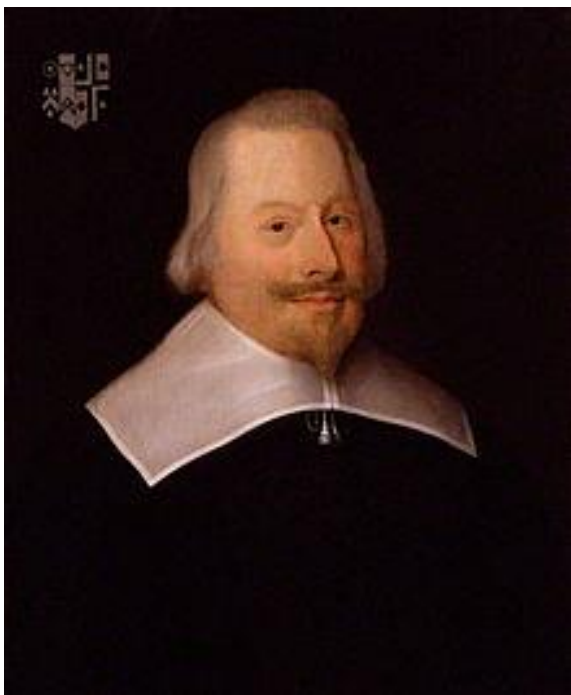


The Hampden statue in Aylesbury Market Place,

credit: <https://www.johnhampden.org/about-john-hampden/>

John Pym was the MP for Calne and then Tavistock. He was active in opposing the arbitrary use of royal power by both James and Charles, and was briefly arrested and taken before the Privy Council in 1621, following the king's dissolution of parliament. Working closely alongside Hampden, he was a vigilant and persuasive organizer of the parliamentary opposition to the king and his advisers, culminating in him helping to draft the Grand Remonstrance, presented to Charles in 1641-2. Pym was instrumental in passing an act forbidding the dissolution of Parliament without its consent. This was followed by acts abolishing the whole apparatus of personal royal government and finance. Pym was not a republican. But he understood that Charles had no intention of honouring any commitment to ruling through parliament, and had

to be coerced. One of his last acts was to negotiate the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643 – an ambitious treaty whereby the Scots agreed to support the English Parliamentarians in their disputes with the royalists and both countries pledged to work for a civil and religious union of England, Scotland, and Ireland under a presbyterian–parliamentary system. He died, probably of cancer, shortly afterwards. On his death, parliament dissolved into competing factions – his unique skill and achievement had been to preserve the unity of parliament, long before there was any formal party organization or discipline.



John Pym, credit Wikipedia

There are, as far as an internet search can reveal, no roads or buildings named after John Pym, other than Pym Court in Cambridge.

And finally, we come to perhaps the most extraordinary of the five names: Gerrard Winstanley. There may only be one road named after him in England – Winstanley Way in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire (<https://anthony1956.blogspot.com/2012/05/place-names-of-wellingborough.html>).

There is a Winstanley Way just down the A1301 in Saffron Walden, but that is named after Henry Winstanley, 1644 – 1703, the Engineer and Engraver who was born in Saffron Walden.

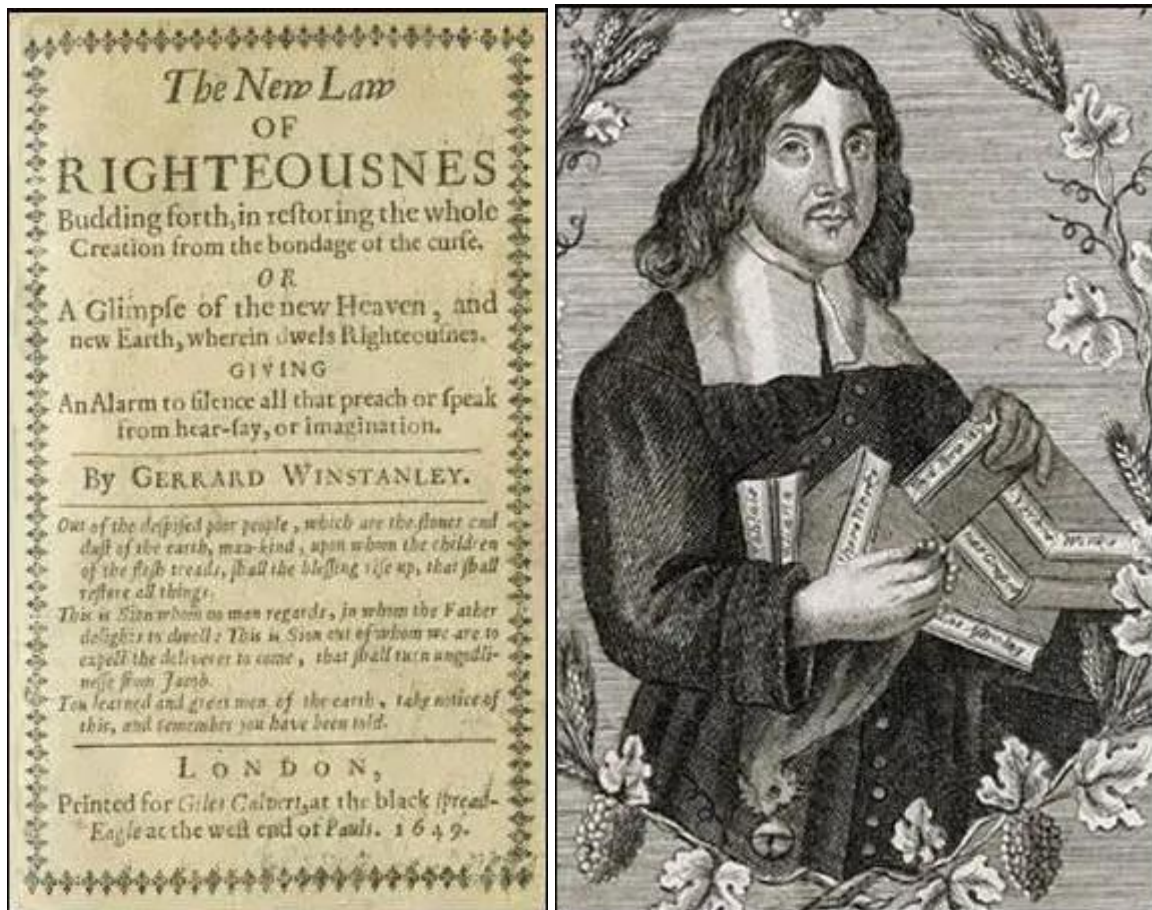
<https://www.basildon.gov.uk/article/2453/Basildon-street-names-their-meanings-and-origins>



And as for buildings, we have in Wigan, where he was born, a memorial garden and an annual music festival. Also in Wigan, there is Gerrard Winstanley House - a former magistrates' court and police station. You might think this would not be an entirely happy reflection of Winstanley's radical preoccupations and interests (which we'll come to), but it turns out that he accommodated himself to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and rather surprisingly was elected Chief Constable of Elmbridge, Surrey (not far from Weybridge, which we'll come to shortly) in October 1671.

Apart from that, Romsey is on its own in naming a building after this extraordinary man. (As a footnote, there is a Winstanley Lecture Theatre in Trinity College, but this is named after a Trinity don, Denys Arthur Winstanley.)

On the fringes of every major social and political upheaval of the last six hundred years, you will find rebellious individuals and groups who were, in terms of their vision of a fair society, and their analysis of current ills, communists. Winstanley was the visionary leader of such a group - the Diggers. In fact, Winstanley called his group the "True Levellers", suggesting an early dispute on the left about which tradition had a greater degree of precedence. Whether Diggers or True Levellers, those of you who are fans of Billy Bragg might recall his wonderful 1985 song, *The World Turned Upside Down*, written by Leon Rosselson. Gerrard Winstanley was born in 1609. When his business as a wool trader hit hard times in the early years of the Civil War, he became an agricultural labourer – and also a pamphleteer. In one such pamphlet, he wrote, "In the beginning of time God made the earth. Not one word was spoken at the beginning that one branch of mankind should rule over another, but selfish imaginations did set up one man to teach and rule over another." (*The New Law of Righteousness*, 1649).



<https://spartacus-educational.com/STUwinstanley.htm>

He called on poor people to rise up and reclaim the land that had been stolen from them – but through non-violence. He set up an agricultural commune at St George’s Hill near Weybridge in Surrey, specifically targeting formerly common land that had been privatised through enclosure. He was a practical man, leading his group in clearing the land and planting crops. But he was also an inspired author. He set out his egalitarian and pacifist ideas in a book called *The Law of Freedom*, 1652, in which he urged his comrades and supporters to “lay the Foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for All, both Rich and Poor ... not one Lording over another, but all looking upon each other as equals in the Creation.” He had some support at senior levels: General Fairfax, no less, was fairly sympathetic. According to George Monbiot, in an entertaining reflection on the relevance of the Diggers today, “They appear to have had a civil conversation, even though the Diggers refused to remove their hats, informing Fairfax that he was no more important than any other man.”

<https://www.monbiot.com/2000/06/01/still-digging/>

But their radical experiment was short-lived, a mere four months, destroyed by the violent opposition of local landowners. The site of his vision of a fairer society, in Surrey, became in more recent years a golf course surrounded by millionaires' mansions.

So, here are our five Civil War and Commonwealth individuals. What do we know about why – 70 years after the creation of Cromwell and Fairfax Roads – three new housing developments on Cromwell Road were named after Pym, Hampden and Winstanley?

The naming of streets and buildings involves a discussion between developers, planning officers and local councillors. These discussions seem to have been verbal rather than written. My source at this point is former Romsey Lib Dem Councillor Catherine Smart (serving 1998 – 2016) and I am grateful to her for sharing her recollections of what happened.

At around the turn of the Millennium, plans were in hand to develop the industrial land to the west of Cromwell Road, abutting the railway. When the land was cleared, a discussion took place within the City about possible names for the new housing developments. Councillor John Durrant (Labour, Arbury) was Chair of the Planning Committee. Perhaps intending some degree of political or historical balance, he suggested that one of the housing developments should be called King Charles Court. This was a surprisingly inappropriate and tin-eared suggestion. Councillor Smart objected, suggesting the names should reflect the parliamentary side in the conflict. Not only to maintain consistency with the existing names, but also, as she put it, "Lib Dems, just as much as Labour (possibly more so - certainly more directly) - trace their political heritage back to the Parliamentary side of the Civil War." She recalls that, "John (Durrant) laughed (he was a very friendly man) and conceded." Councillor Smart is not sure whether she herself proposed the three names that resulted – but it does seem possible or indeed likely.

So Hampden Gardens (completed in 2005/6) and Winstanley Court (completed in 2003) duly received their current names. Pym Court offers a further twist. It was completed in 2013/14, and it appears that to begin with, it was due to be named Veritas Court. Presumably, another bit of homework or historical reflection within the Council then took place, and it was renamed Pym Court, completing the trio of housing developments.



So I conclude that to Catherine Smart should go the credit for at least pointing the Planning Department in the direction of consistency with the parliamentary tradition that began with Cromwell and Fairfax. And if it was not Catherine Smart herself, then that anonymous officer in the Planning Department with a sense of history, or a sense of humour, or both, deserves our thanks.

Acknowledgements: I'd like to thank former Councillors Catherine Smart and Paul Saunders; Christopher Tweed (3C Shared Services) and Caroline Wilson (MRHS).